

ON THE DEATH OF CHARACTER - A METATHEATRICAL TRAGEDY

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ABSTRACT

The project explores the possibility of redefining metatheatre as a theatrical genre, introducing the idea of 'meta' in relation to the arts and in particular theatre. Meta is discussed as a concept which, when applied as a prefix, describes how an art form works, and can be interpreted, one level beyond itself. Metatheatre allows a higher level of understanding of the performance being viewed by creating recognisable links with an audience's prior knowledge and experience of theatre. Metatheatre further emphasises this understanding by establishing recognition of the recognition process through interaction with the cultural web.

The exegesis furthers the debate about the status of metatheatre as either dramatic device or theatrical genre through an analysis of the works of Richard Hornby (*Drama, Metadrama & Perception* 1986), Lionel Abel (*Metatheatre – A New View Of Dramatic Form* 1963 and *Tragedy & Metatheatre – Essays On Dramatic Form* 2003) and my own observations and findings.

The project, through exegesis, script and staged production, identifies and discusses the key devices and themes involved in the creation of metatheatre as well as the delivery and effectiveness of these devices and themes. Through this analysis a clearer definition of metatheatre is offered, in which dramatic device and thematic concern are given equal importance. The effectiveness of the integration and correlation between device and theme within metatheatrical works is analysed and found to be crucial in the delivery of successful metatheatre. From this analysis the purpose of metatheatre within current and contemporary societies is also presented and argued.

My own creative works and processes are analysed in relation to this new definition, and discussion of my own metatheatrical process is highlighted as a key component in my major creative work, 'On The Death Of Character'. This work deals with the death of the naïve character and birth of the playwright or metatheatrical character in an autobiographical style. Key points of discussion within this work include an analysis of inspiration and the metatheatrical importance of writer's block. The play is essentially concerned with the role of the playwright within metatheatre.

My own metatheatrical style comes under scrutiny in both the exegesis and in the scripted and staged work as I explore concepts such as the illusion\reality conundrum and the reverse babushka effect in both a creative and theoretical manner.

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Introduction

Over the course of my candidature I have often been asked what my plays are about? The short answer is metatheatre. I clarify this as theatre about theatre, however, this definition is very open-ended, failing to pinpoint the what and why of metatheatre. In large this is because metatheatre is paradoxical. It is in this paradoxicality that it speaks to me most strongly. After two years on this project I have come up with an explanation that goes a little further towards providing a clearer definition than those currently available. It is my journey towards this explanation that you are about to begin.

However before beginning I think it is worth noting that I have chosen to write this exegesis in a more personal and informal style than is usually encountered in academic work. This style could even be labelled metanarrative in that it comments on the exegesis as it is being composed. I feel this more personal approach lends itself to discussion of metatheatre and mirrors the way in which metatheatre refers to other forms of theatre. I find metatheatre a very personal theatrical experience and feel a discussion of metatheatre should be a similarly personal experience. I also believe that this metanarrative allows a more honest connection with my own creative and academic process than would be achievable with a more formal approach.

Lionel Abel first coined the term metatheatre in his collection of essays *Metatheatre - A New View of Dramatic Form* (1963). Since then, the idea has been bandied about by numerous academics without resolving the question of what, exactly, is metatheatre? The closer academics such as Lionel Abel, Richard Hornby, June Schleuter and Niall Slater, come to defining the term, the more a clearer definition becomes necessary. Slater makes the statement in *Spectator Politics* (2002:1) that: '...precise definitions of metatheatre vary widely.'

Through 'On the Death of Character - A Metatheatrical Tragedy' I offer a new and clearer definition of the genre. In the process of arriving at this definition, I have aimed to: enlighten the

viewing and reading of my own works, in particular the works completed during this candidature: 'The Bureau', 'On The Death of Character' (henceforth referred to as 'On The Death') and 'Moon Bride Mourning' ('Moon Bride'); resolve the terms of my own style within the canon of metatheatre; write, direct and produce an original metatheatre; and, further the device/genre debate surrounding classification of metatheatre.

The project is built around the 'death of character'. It is important to note that with this statement I am referring to the naïve character's death. It can be argued that because a character speaks to be heard by an audience they are aware of the fact that they are on stage, however, this project makes a special and strong distinction between the character and the actor. It is the actor that makes decisions regarding projection and movement and these decisions do not lessen the naivety of the character. Metatheatrical characters, however, are aware of their theatricality prior to their interpretation by an actor and in this sense the naïve character is dead within metatheatre.

The death of the naïve character has led to the birth of the playwright character. These characters knowingly refer to their character status and their theatrical existence. Heiner Muller's *Hamlet* (*Hamletmachine* 1977) is a good example. Shakespeare's character Hamlet is also a good example, stating: '...get me a fellowship in a cry of players?' (p. 73) Although he is speaking of his skill in preparing the *Murder of Gonzago* he also recognises his theatrical nature. Later Horatio betrays his playwright status, declaiming:

... these bodies
High on a stage be placed to the view,
And let me speak to th'yet unknowing world
How these things came about. (p.136)

In the first instance Horatio speaks of opening a public inquiry into the deaths, in the second he delivers a prologue. We believe that what he will recount at the inquiry is *Hamlet*. Horatio teases his audience, asking them to define the 'unknowing world'. Is it the world in which the audience resides or the unseen world surrounding the decrepit monarchy?

The second part of the project title, 'A Metatheatrical Tragedy' refers to the particular way in which playwrights use and have used these playwright characters. The manipulation of these characters into situations that find them resenting their theatricality creates the tragedy of metatheatrical works. It is when characters are rebelling against their theatricality that

metatheatre becomes antitheatrical and more closely resembles life. The question posed by the Father in Pirandello's 1933 work, *Six Characters In Search of an Author (Six Characters)* epitomises the metatheatrical tragedy:

...how can we ever come to an understanding if I put in the words I utter the sense and value of things as I see them; while you... must inevitably translate them... (p. 224)

Conversely, when examining Dario Fo's *The Open Couple* (1994), Man finds himself limited by his belief that he is not a character whilst his wife can control his actions with her knowledge of her character status:

Man: Watch! You'll fall out!
Woman: No, I won't. There's the stage. (p. 209-10)

And later:

Man: I'm a character in a play, too!
Woman: No, you're not. You're on the fourth floor. (p. 210)

The character of Woman is an example of what I term protheatrical metatheatre. This form occurs when the character exhibits no resentment at their status. However, the Woman's attitude works to define the helplessness of Man's antitheatrical conundrum. *The Open Couple* is an excellent reference when defining a work or character as either pro or anti-theatrical.

Chapter one of this exegesis explores the etymology of meta as a prefix. Through a greater understanding of meta we gain a greater understanding of the term metatheatre. Chapter two advances and attempts to resolve, the debate surrounding metatheatre's classification as either genre or device. Through the creation of a clear distinction between metatheatre as genre or device the dramatic works that belong in the metatheatrical canon become clear and a concise body of work from which to draw a clearer definition is provided. Chapter three analyses how metatheatre works to create successful theatre and how the genre works in relation to the individual audience member is discussed in relation to Hornby's 'drama/culture complex' (1986), which I term, the cultural web. Through understanding how metatheatre works we can begin to understand how it is created. Chapters four and five further the discussion of how metatheatre is created offering an analysis of Hornby and Abel's research respectively. Chapter six synthesises

the relevant points of Hornby and Abel's arguments into a model for the recognition of metatheatre. Chapter seven puts this synthesis into practice as I discuss my own theory and provide an analysis of my metatheatrical techniques and works as both a playwright and director. Chapter eight continues the metanarrative discussing my own process and difficulties I have faced through combining creative and analytical research and the following conclusion ties the exegesis with the creative output succinctly stating my new definition of metatheatre.

CHAPTER ONE

Meta

Originating as a prefix, meta is now used in modern language as both a prefix and an adjective. As a prefix one of the earliest incarnations of meta was in the philosophical/scientific world of metaphysics. Since then the meta phenomenon has gone on to affect the majority of art forms and found its way solidly into the English language. Puchner states in his introduction to Abel's *Tragedy and Metatheatre - Essays on Dramatic Form (Tragedy and Meta.)* 'There existed no art form in the twentieth century that did not acquire... the prefix meta' (2003:3) But what exactly does the prefix meta mean? *Webster's New Millennium Dictionary of English* (2005) defines meta as, 'referring to itself or its characteristics...' *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2005) tells us meta is, 'beyond; transcending; more comprehensive.' This view implies metatheatre is theatre, which transcends itself and in doing so becomes more comprehensive. The most useful insight into the meaning of meta, however, has come from a most unexpected source. Denis Howe defines meta in *The Free On-line Dictionary of Computing* (2006) as, 'A prefix meaning one level of description higher. If X is a concept then meta-X is data, or processes operating on X.' Metatheatre therefore is theatre working one level higher than and upon itself. The general etymology of meta however stems from the idea of beyond.

These definitions support the views of Jane Bowers in *They Watch Me As They Watch This* (1991) and Mark Ringer, cited by Slater in *Spectator Politics*. (2002) Bowers comments 'Metadrama will call attention to its own construction.' (1991:5) and Ringer states: 'Metatheatre calls attention to the semiotic systems of dramatic performance.' (2002:2) Bowers goes on to say 'Not only will the play be a discourse about its ostensible subject, it will also be a discourse about dramatic art itself.' (1994:5) These statements support the concept that the prefix meta allows us to describe things that are working one level beyond the given topic.

Hornby in *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception (Drama)* (1986:31) describes metatheatre as: 'drama about drama... it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself.'

I understand that metatheatre makes a connection between its portrayal and the mode of portrayal however this does not create a concise definition. These brief synopses might be enough to satisfy the occasional theatregoer however they also allow classification of a number of non-metatheatrical works into the metatheatrical canon. I will take my definition one step further than Bowers and state that metatheatre is theatre in which the ostensible subject and the theatricality of the dramatic art used to portray it are inexplicably intertwined to the point where separating the two becomes paradoxical in its complexity. It is a theatre in which the style and structure can become the theme and vice versa. In The following chapter this assertion will be furthered as I begin to delineate metatheatre as genre from metatheatre as device.

CHAPTER TWO

When Device Equals Genre

The difficulty in viewing metatheatre as a separate genre resides in the belief that metatheatre is created through the use of specific devices. This implies that if enough devices are evident that genre is formed. Metatheatrical devices alone are often viewed as a series of tricks whereby the playwright highlights their own cleverness. When viewed as a genre the importance of the playwright's cleverness is unified with the message and goals of the performance.

If meta is any given product working at least one level higher than itself, then metatheatre is theatre working at least one level beyond that of 'standard' theatre. Surely theatre is not a device but a medium and metatheatre therefore a genre of the medium.

Effective metatheatre correlates the devices of the play with the themes to the point where structure and device become representative of theme and action. Patrice Pavis states in *Languages of the Stage* (1982:85), 'A metadramatic text will inscribe its own reading within the text... An analysis of the piece is worked into the delivery.' while Slater notes:

The notion that metatheatre works... through the violation of illusionistic expectations to make the audience laugh renders it simply one technique or tool among many. (2002:6-7)

While metatheatre may cause a humorous reaction, this reaction exists for a reason, even if that reason is to remind the audience that they are watching a fiction. Humour is not the only reason for metatheatre's existence.

All genres are made up of devices. It can be argued that metatheatre is a group of metatheatrical devices and analogously that tragedy is a group of tragic devices; hamartia, peripeteia and divine will for example. This is not enough to create good theatre however. Without an overriding tragic

theme, the tragic devices will not create a tragedy. Similarly without overriding metatheatrical themes, metatheatrical devices do not create a metatheatre.

To further the point, consider a table. A table is made up of tabular devices, legs, top and brackets but these items on their own do not form a table; they could be used to construct abstract art for example. It is in the use of these components that they become a table. Metatheatrical devices must be used in tandem with theme and structure, in order for metatheatre to occur.

The devices become the codes we use to understand the genre. Through these codes we understand what we are watching and can respond appropriately. Without correlation between themes and devices a play cannot be metatheatrical. Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* (1985) is a good example. Frayn's play includes many metatheatrical moments. The play exhibits the difficulties of staging farce as well as problems with the acting profession. The play, however, is not a metatheatre. The thematic content of the play, is non-metatheatrical, *Noises Off* examines touring theatre and the relationships formed during performance. It does not work at one level higher than itself. The struggles of the characters are not presented as metaphors for a higher purpose and the characters do not become aware of their theatricality.

Similarly devices of other genres exist within works of metatheatre. *Hamlet* exhibits many devices associated with tragedy. Hamlet's fatal flaw however is also his most metatheatrical asset. The exposition of the fluidity of his existence, his philosophising, prevents Hamlet from killing Claudius on numerous occasions. This fluidity, however, allows the audience to understand the elusiveness of self. Abel states that *Hamlet* is heightened by its inability to produce a tragic hero. (1963:118) In this light *Hamlet* is a metatheatre that examines the psyche of tragic heroes. Abel, also comments that: '...we find metatheatre expanding and its tragic predecessor contracting until it seems that... any play... exhibits... metatheatre.' (1963:19)

Playwrights often use conflicting devices in order to strengthen the prevailing genre. Black comedy uses tragedy in order to strengthen the comedy, we learn through codification that it is a comedy and are encouraged to laugh at the tragic circumstances.

So what are the major thematic concerns of metatheatre? All metatheatres examine the concept of self. Common questions include; What is self? Is it concrete or fluid? Where is it? And, do I have

control over it? Through this thematic concern, use of metatheatrical devices such as; role within a role (rwar) and play within a play (pwap), enable plays to examine self one level beyond the play as the rwar or pwap become thematic. A common form of creating 'beyond' is seen when metatheatres are metaphors for life. We often find ourselves in situations similar to those of playing a role within a role or performing a play within a play. *Six Characters* allows examination of the difference between fluid and fixed selves. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, (1967) (*Ros. & Guil.*) forces consideration of the theatrical nature of life and both Calderon de la Barca's *Life Is A Dream* (1959) and Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, (1901) throw audiences into the paradox of trying to separate real reality from fictional reality.

Macbeth's statement from *Macbeth* summarises the way in which theatre and life mirror each other:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. (Shakespeare in Abel, 1963:56)

Macbeth forces us to compare life with theatre and reminds us that his statement is itself a piece of theatre and therefore fictional.

Abel does not acknowledge the device/genre argument. In his view metatheatre stems from characters of tragedy that fail to be tragic. He does however clarify how the tragedies he views as metatheatres go awry, 'I see tragedy as dealing with the real world and metatheatre as dealing with the world of the imagination.' (1963:v) at the core of his idea lies the fact that, 'Before we can hope to understand metatheatre, we must understand tragedy.' (1963:6) Martin Puchner summarises, 'Tragedy glorifies the structure of the world, metatheatre deals with the imagination.' (Puchner in Abel, 2003:6-7)

It is important to remember that Abel's metatheatre is driven by character, rather than device, and that the overriding intention of a playwright to write tragedy does not preclude the writing of metatheatre.

In opposition to Abel is Hornby. Hornby is a stickler for the device driven metatheatre or, to use his own term, metadrama. Hornby fails to see how tragedy and metatheatre can be linked.

Hornby's view indicates that tragedy is concerned with life and the moral condition whereas metatheatre focuses upon the illusory nature of life. In my mind, Hornby conforms to Puchner's statements that: 'The theatre no longer has to worry about morals... it does not need to express the underlying conflicts of society. ... theatre can celebrate itself...' (2003:11) And: '...metatheatre marks the moment when theatre must no longer justify itself through reality effects... it can step forward and be itself.' (2003:11)

One particular metatheatrical device, which can create confusion in the designation of genre is parody. Metatheatrical parody, typically used within farce, enables plays to be compared to other literary works or occurrences. In this instance the illusion of the play as real is broken and the audience is taken beyond, to the literary history surrounding the play. This is an example of metadramatic layering, a core device of metatheatre.

The distinction between metatheatre as a genre and as a device is now clear. The genre must integrate relevant themes with relevant devices to achieve an overall metatheatre. The next chapter examines metatheatre's alignment within theatre, and how and why metatheatre works, through examination of Hornby's drama/culture complex, which I have termed the cultural web.

CHAPTER THREE

Metatheatres & The Cultural Web

Before we can understand why metatheatres are effective we must understand why theatre is effective. Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (*Civilization*), separates human thought into two different processes, primary and secondary. (1930:144) Without delving into analysis of the human psyche, let us accept that, primary thought process deals with concepts of pleasure and pain whilst the secondary thought process deals with logic and analysis.

We go to the theatre for pleasure. What we view, engages or disengages us through our primary thought process, however, we understand the play through our secondary process. The human mind uses our personal experience of similar events and knowledge of drama to understand what we see on stage. We understand the foreground through analysis of the background. This process is not limited to theatre and operates whenever we encounter external stimuli. Theatre plays a special role in this system as it seeks to recreate images and situations similar to life: 'Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make the stone stony.' (Shklovsky in Hornby, 1986:62)

Hornby terms this the drama/culture complex and offers the following axioms to relate drama to reality:

1. A play does not reflect life... it reflects itself.
2. ...it relates to other plays as a system.
3. This system... intersects with... systems of literature... [and] culture generally.
4. It is through the drama/culture complex, rather than through individual plays, that we interpret life. (1986:17)

I refer to this complex as the cultural web as it is not drama specific. It is the way in which we comprehend the world; we understand the concept of a wall through experience with walls.

Before clarifying our concept of a wall it is not a part of our individual web and cannot be comprehended.

Through our ability to constantly analyse and relate what we experience to what we already know we are participating in metacognitive activity. Plays invite us to compare them, through similarities or dissimilarities, to real life. This occurs through the cultural web and affirms that we are watching a fiction that is commenting upon life. We are never truly immersed.

Howard Barker's *Arguments For A Theatre* describes why tragedy can be successful given the overall negative connotations of life evoked, '[The audience] is unconsolated by a theatre of tragedy but learns to forgo consolation... recognis[ing] theatre as the solitary source for spiritual pain... Because the refusal of pain diminishes the soul.' (1989:128) We find theatrical pain a palatable alternative to real pain. We do not grieve at successful tragedy. We applaud the experience of pain without personal connection.

It can be argued that all theatre is metatheatrical, that all art is metatheatrical and that all culture is metatheatrical, ad infinitum, and after lengthy research into the topic, I have found that this may be the case, however, I am sure this feeling will fade with time. Every aspect of existence is not metatheatrical and the average person does not walk through life in a metatheatrical haze. The world is not exclusively metatheatrical, just as not all plays are metatheatres. It is how metatheatre interacts with the cultural web that separates it from other genres. Slater mentions that, '...by opening up the theatrical process to our gaze, [metatheatre] invites our contemplation on the quality [and] the goals of the... performance.' (2002:7) When we view a play we emote because the stimulus is framed as either similar or dissimilar to our own experience. Metatheatre takes the same stimulus and delivers it in a way that evokes recognition of the frame itself. Through metatheatre life becomes as theatrical as the play. 'We have come to see life as... a play with no framing reality. All the world's a stage... but nobody is watching...' (Hornby, 1986:47)

Metatheatre creates more immediate ties with and within the cultural web. Fo's *The Open Couple* allows us to empathise with the suicidal tendencies of the characters yet at the same time recognise the situation as innately theatrical. This increases our rapport with Man because we recognise his naivety and in turn, can relate this to real life scenarios where an individual's naivety has prevented them from seeing the whole picture.

The playwright creates these reference points deliberately in order to strengthen the audience's understanding by offering a means whereby the stimuli can be found relevant to themselves personally. *Six Characters* opens with a troupe of actors rehearsing Pirandello's play, *Mixing It Up*. Pirandello refers to the obscurity of his work, '...we are reduced to putting on Pirandello's works, where nobody understands anything'. (1995:213) This creates an easily recognisable frame. Metatheatre is successful because the frames and awareness of reference are easily recognised. Robert Egan comments in *Drama Within Drama* that:

...whenever it occurs, the portrayal... of a direct application of dramatic art to life affords a significant... perspective on both the world of the play and the world surrounding it. (1975:2)

Unsuccessful metatheatre does not relate strongly to the cultural web. This relationship is weak when; 1) the audience does not recognise the mode of framing, or 2) the play does not supply frames, which are relevant to the audience. Instance 1 is evident in the non-linear structure of Muller's *Hamletmachine*. The unfamiliar juxtaposition of scenes makes connections to the framing devices difficult. The historical and literary allusions, however, ensure the majority of metatheatrical content is accessible but I would argue, that the structure creates difficulties in understanding the meta impact of the play. Instance 2 is evident in Edith Grossman's translation of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (2003). The impact of allusions to novels of chivalry is not felt by current readers due to the lack of exposure to the works being alluded to. Our experience of *Don Quixote*, is infinitely less meta than it would have been for contemporary readers.

On the same note unsuccessful theatre in general is such because it allows no pathway to connect the action to the cultural web or does not allow recognition of the framing devices. Even the most avant-garde works, claiming to have created radically new brands of theatre, are quite easily linked to the cultural web. Hornby points out that Samuel Beckett's theatre places recognisable characters in recognisable locations but ensures that the two do not match. Estragon and Vladimir under the tree in nowhere and Nagg & Nell living in ashbins are good examples. Eugene Ionesco's theatre challenges norms within language, creating highly understandably incomprehensible scenes such as the climax of *The Bald Prima Donna* (1958) by placing language out of context. These plays work not because they are similar but because they are dissimilar to life.

This dissimilarity approach can also be seen in the works of Peter Handke. Schleuter's *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama (Metafictional)* (1979:106) states that: 'Handke feels there should be no... mimetic relationship between [drama and life]; drama should be... intensely artificial.' This is especially true of Handke's *The Ride Across Lake Constance* (1972) a play that in its very title allows metatheatrical connection with the moralistic tale of the horseman and the frozen lake. In fact many titles create a metatheatrical impact, Stoppard's *Ros & Guil*, and *After Magritte* (1970) spring to mind. Hornby supports Schleuter's comments stating: 'A play is autotelic: it reflects no external reality... but instead reflects inward, mirroring itself.' (1986:20) and Puchner interprets the works of Abel: '...metatheatre is a theatre not concerned about the world 'outside' the theatre, but only with the theatre itself.' (2003:2)

All theatre is understood through analysis of the primary thought process by the secondary thought process. Metatheatre differs from standard theatre by creating conscious recognition of this process. The next chapter will examine Richard Hornby's findings in regard to specifically how metatheatre creates this conscious recognition.

CHAPTER FOUR

Under The Bonnet With Hornby

Through *Drama* Hornby broadens and narrows the Abellian origins of metatheatre. This has positive and negative effects. In the positive, Hornby's explorations into metatheatrical mechanics have created easier methods of metatheatrical identification. The tightened technical constraints provide a welcome relief from Abel's ambiguous approach to the 'how' of metatheatre. Conversely, however, the elaborate and useful device-by-device analysis allows a fresh platform to launch the device/genre debate.

Hornby comments that throughout history there have been periods when metatheatre is prolific whilst, at other times it is rarely evident. Hornby argues this use or disuse is a reflection of the prevailing world-view of the time. At times of great optimism about life's reality, metatheatre is rarely evident. In times of pessimism about the reality of life; when life is viewed to be illusory metatheatre flourishes as a metaphor for life. Metatheatre 'is both reflective and expressive of its society's deep cynicism about life.' (Hornby, 1986:45) In Ancient Greek society pessimistic philosophers were scarce, the prevalent view was never that life itself was a fraud. Hence there was little overt metatheatre. Plato's view, as cited in Sidney Homan's *When the Theatre Turns to Itself*, (1981:14) that '...we have only a mere copy of a truth that is to be found elsewhere and only approximated here.' was not part of the popular philosophy. The popular view was then reversed during the English Renaissance. Society was highly Christianised, and the popular view was that life is lived in an illusory world in contrast to the true world of heaven. (Hornby, 1986:46) During this time metatheatre was abundant. Shakespeare's, *The Taming of The Shrew* (*Shrew*), *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are prime examples. Hornby summarises, 'during ages in which people are basically optimistic about [the reality of] life, the play within a play will have no appeal.' (1986:46)

Why do we see a resurgence of metatheatrical works in the 20th century? Hornby argues this is indicative of a deep cynicism underlining our perception of the world. He notes a key difference, in the past metatheatre has been confined whilst now the frames are blurred. The audience is aware in *Shrew* that the play is a play within a play framed by a dream. The same can be said of Calderon's *Life Is A Dream* and Corneille's *The Theatrical Illusion* (1976). The works of Stoppard, Fo and Muller, however have no concise frame. We see instances of play within a play within a play ad infinitum with no specific instance being indicative of the real. The line between character and actor is indistinct in the works of Handke and Muller and suspension of disbelief is challenged in Fo's *The Open Couple*. If metatheatre represents a society's cynicism about life then this implies that a deeper cynicism is evident currently. The difference is that current plays imply there is no true reality beyond the illusory one. In the past illusory life is framed by non-illusory life: heaven, nirvana, unconscious and dream states. Current metatheatre represents an illusory life with no outer frame.

Hornby argues that metatheatre is effective through the creation of *ostraneniye*. (1986:98). This term originated with Viktor Shlovsky, and describes the process whereby art creates a distancing or alienation effect when experienced. Within metatheatre we are distanced by remembering that what we are watching is a play and we remember this through either reference to the plays illusory nature or the reality of life outside the play. Brecht later adapted this term into his *verfremdungseffekt* and used it as a means of creating didactic theatre.

We understand a play through a registration of the play's stimuli against individual experience and knowledge. Metatheatre reveals this act of registration. In recognising the process we examine the construction and delivery of the play at a level beyond what we would during a 'standard' play. This causes us to experience *ostraneniye*. We are distanced from the immediacy and instead watch the performance in a meta way. We have become metaobservers.

Because 'metatheatre is fundamentally an experience of performance.' (Slater 2002:2) accidents can happen and meta-induced *ostraneniye* is not always purposeful. Hornby reminds us:

We can recall moments in theatre when something happened that made us wonder whether or not it was part of the performance. (1986:98)

I term this accidental metatheatre. Writers such as Handke (*Offending The Audience*, 1971) have tried to recreate accidental metatheatre, however, true accidental metatheatre happens completely by chance. Puchner states, 'Modern theatre becomes metatheatre when there is an accident in the machinery of the play...' (2003:2) an actor forgetting their lines reminds us that they are an actor. In the majority of cases this does not have a positive effect upon the play. Accidental metatheatre, when it occurs, destroys the illusion of the performance being real. When accidental metatheatre is staged, however, we still experience *ostraneniye* but the playwright or director elicits this response from us. The production may examine the frailty of the actor or theatrical convention in contrast to the resilience of character.

I would now like to introduce, what Hornby terms the 'possible varieties of... metadrama' (1986:32), however, rather than varieties I term them devices. Abel comments about the play within a play, that; '...this term suggests only a device, and not a definite form.' (1963:v-vi) It is important to consider the relationship between these devices and the thematic content of a work to discover the effectiveness of any given device. I am only including four of Hornby's five devices. The omitted device, ceremony within the play, is a combination of two other devices and does not need special explanation.

The four major metatheatrical devices to be examined are: the play within the play (pwap): role playing within the role (rwar): literary and real life reference, and self reference. (1986:32) The pwap device exists in two forms, framed and inset. Framed pwap occurs when the majority of a performance is a pwap, *Shrew* is a good example, the opening scene frames the play and the ensuing five acts depict a hallucination or dream experienced by Sly, induced by the huntsmen and players.

Calderon's *Life Is A Dream* exhibits a complex framed pwap. The scenes depicting Segismund's life at court are part of one pwap, framed by the captivity scenes. Calderon repeatedly juxtaposes these scenes, offering comparison points throughout the play designed to remind us that one life is illusory and the other real.

Stoppard's *Ros. & Guil.* depicts a clever instance of the framed pwap. The framing happens in the audience's knowledge of the characters' prior existence in *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* is the outer play and *Ros. & Guil.* an elaborately framed pwap.

The inset pwap occurs whenever the play diverges into a pwap for short periods of time. Scenes from *The Murder Of Gonzago* within *Hamlet* and the rude mechanicals' play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are typical examples.

Michael Snelgrove's 1977 metatheatre, *Bums On Seats* features an interesting use of inset pwap. The second act allows us to watch an audience watching a staged play. In this instance the inset pwap is only heard rather than seen and we become involved in, the meta, activity of watching an audience, watching a play and each other.

I often make use of both framed and inset pwaps, 'Scripted' gradually shifts into a framed pwap as the characters recognise their character state and begin performing rather than living. Within this framed pwap they refer to their play as an inset pwap, which they do not believe they are a part of.

'Moon Bride' begins with a framed pwap as the Priestess and Boy convince the Monk that his bride has died. The frame is not recognised until the Monk exits and the Priestess and Boy expose their ruse as a test of the Monk's tragic potential,

Boy: [The Monk exits... They drop the façade.]
 [Chuckling.] Your moon bride sleeps in the well? (p. 5)

When the boy and priestess 'drop the façade.' the frame is revealed to us and all that has come before is recognised as an elaborate pwap.

In 'He' characters seek to impart knowledge of their situation through moralistic stories staged as inset pwaps. In explaining the importance of self, Risk performs a Moses-like, return from the mount: 'Hear me, my people: We live in a time of crisis, the winds of change blow heavily, we must know ourselves.' (p. 21)

These pwaps highlight the theatrical nature of character and the fluidity of self. 'On The Death' features an inset play enacting a variation of Buridan's Bridge Paradox. (c.1500) The decision to stage this section in the inset pwap form was deliberate. The use of an inset pwap fosters an

audience's suspension of disbelief, avoiding lengthy exposition. We quickly arrive at the conclusion of the scene where the impossibility of the paradox and the plight of the characters are compared. Man explains to Girl that just as the paradox doesn't make sense, neither do they. In Man's view there is no purpose for existence. There is no external framing reality,

Girl	...it doesn't make sense.
Man	...I know!
Girl	You do?
Man	Yes... It's our reason for existing.
Girl	How? It didn't work. (p. 17)

Pirandello successfully amalgamates the framed and inset pwaps in *Six Characters*. Audiences cannot define which play is the inner and which the outer. Pirandello's blurring of the frame enabled later playwrights to capitalise on the ambiguity of this approach, paving the way for the multi-layered metatheatres of Muller, Stoppard and others.

Hornby explains the nature of the pwap '...we are reminded by the play within a play that the play is also an illusion...' (1986:45) By extension, if the outer play is illusory then our own lives (the outer, outer play) may also be illusory. We cannot prove or disprove this theory and are left with a paradox.

The paradox embedded in the idea that life is actually part of a master script and the fear that free will is nonexistent is termed ontological insecurity. *The Macquarie Dictionary* (1981) Jaques' 'All the world's a stage' (p. 38) soliloquy in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is heavily laden with ontological insecurity. Ronald Laing cited in Hornby, describes ontological insecurity as; '...a person's lack of a centrally firm sense of his own... reality and identity.' (1986:79) Jaques views the existence of himself and others as purely fictional and *Hamletmachine* presents a Hamlet complaining that his theatre cannot be recreated because: 'The script has been lost.' (Muller, 1977:56)

The condition of ontological insecurity is of major importance in 'On The Death'. Girl states, 'I'll fall and no one will catch me', (p. 3) implying her lack of a higher purpose and later when considering that her life is meaningless, 'You see our games. Is there a meaning?' (p. 5) and Man revels in the ontological insecurity of others, exclaiming; 'I do not believe that they do not think there is a script.' (p. 9) The way in which the characters react to the ontological crisis is

indicative of human nature. Some relish the ability to live without design whilst others crave boundaries. Metatheatre allows ontological insecurity to be taken to extremes unreachable in life. I am able to exalt or crush characters through proof of ontological design: As examples; the script is found in 'The Bureau', the author is present throughout 'Scripted' and characters confront actors in 'He'.

The second of Hornby's devices is role within a role. Rwar relates to individual characters as pwaps relate to the group. '...role playing within the role... explore[s] the... individual.' (*Drama*, p. 85) This device gains a third layer in live performance as the character playing the role is in turn being played by an actor.

Rwar occurs in three types, voluntary, involuntary and allegorical. Voluntary and involuntary rwar occur most commonly. As their titles suggest, the difference lies in how the role is assumed. Portia's portrayal of the lawyer in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and the roles assumed by the patrons in Genet's *The Balcony* are all voluntarily assumed rwars. Segismund in *Life Is A Dream* and Sly in *Shrew* take on their new roles involuntarily. They are unaware that their new personas are fictitious.

'Pages', by Tasmanian playwright, William Wilson (2004) presents a mix of voluntary and involuntary rwar. The characters, A, B and C all create roles for each other one attribute at a time. As they receive new personality traits these traits influence the traits they assign to the others and so on. For example, B assigns A with arrogance in the first exchange, A's arrogance influences how he creates C from then on. Eventually C is involuntarily assigned 0436-615-7259 as a personality trait and promptly goes insane.

Allegorical rwar is seen when beings or people who are external to the play are given a rwar. The author in 'Scripted' is allegorically given the role of god. In 'Moon Bride' a similar omnipotence is assigned to theatre. 'On The Death' creates an allegorically cowardly author. Man rants, 'Writing words for other to speak. Coward.' (p. 18) and Boy describes playwrights as having an, 'Arrogant instability of the mind.' (p. 18).

Why is rwar a successful conveyer of metatheatre? Freud describes people, in *Civilization* as having an inner rolelessness. (Freud, 1930) This rolelessness is covered by personal roles, worn

to prevent recognition of this rolelessness. Freud reminds us of our infantile origins when there was no distinction between self and the external world. Rwar is an avoidance of remembering that we are creatures of, rather than in, the universe. The roles we wear are environmental, they are a mimicry of roles we see being assumed by others. Ibsen's Peer in *Peer Gynt* (2003) likens himself to an onion, he has role upon role just as an onion has layer upon layer. Peer fears that there is nothing at the core of his onion or any onion for that matter. Ibsen's examination of role in *Peer Gynt* allows the audience to 'rediscover rolelessness' (1986:73). Schleuter's description of Guildenstern's; 'Give us this day our daily mask,' speech as being 'the prayer of the real-life individual' (1979:11) and Homan's analogy that: 'If the theatre is... a way of creating illusion... is not the world also one of role playing?' (1981:13) (*When The Theatre*) support Hornby's idea that metatheatre helps us to rediscover rolelessness.

Hornby's third and fourth major devices operate in identical fashion. They are literary and life reference and self-reference. The meta impact of literary and life reference is impossible to gauge because the potential for meta impact lies solely in the audience's knowledge of the literary or life scenario referred to; '...the degree of metadramatic estrangement... is proportional to the degree... of recogni[tion]' (1986:88)

Reference to literary structures is easily recognisable. The meta impact of the comment made to Peer whilst shipwrecked at sea that, 'no one dies halfway through the last act', is greater than if Ibsen had, referenced an obscure Norwegian folk song.

Just as *Ros. & Guil.* can be viewed as an elaborately framed pwap, so too can it be viewed as a literary reference to *Hamlet*, as can *Hamletmachine*. Pirandello references his own work and Fo references staging conventions throughout *The Open Couple*.

Literary reference is combined with rwar when the characters of 'He' assume the roles of Lady Macbeth, Romeo, Juliet, Gloucester and Ophelia. Sancho Panza is used as a comparison point in my unfinished 'ismism'. Buridan's Bridge paradox appears in literary works other than 'On The Death' and Girl's comment, 'Friends will read and offer advice... reinforc[ing] the... creative death.' (p. 19) reflects my own processes of creating, proofing and editing a new play.

Literary references in themselves can easily be considered as miniature inset pwaps, where, for a moment, the literary work being referred to is framed by the outer play.

Life references work in the same manner as literary references. Mentioning real events reminds the audience of theatrical illusion, however, this device limits its accessibility in the same way literary reference does. The audience must recognise the reference point for metatheatrical impact to occur. The humour of Van Badham's *Capital* (2003) relies heavily on the current anti-terrorist standpoint of the Bush administration. Throughout the play reference is made to both real people and events, culminating in a reference to the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre. Whilst this event is known globally, other non-fictional reference points will become ineffective as we fail to recognise the significance of any given name or corporation.

Hamletmachine cleverly establishes comparison between the treason at Elsinore Castle and the Hungarian Rajk affair, allowing us to see similarities between a four hundred year old text and a fifty-year-old event.

Homan mentions Genet's argument that: '...theatre is 'true' in that it is self confessed fakery, whereas life is 'false'... [as] men act as if they were not actors...' (1981:13) This view implies that literature is fixed and eternal whereas life is brief and easily forgotten.

Self-reference, however, links instantly with the cultural web because the event referred to is also the event being experienced. Handke's *Offending The Audience* is an extended self-reference and *The Ride Across Lake Constance* is more subtly self-referential because, in Schleuter's view, 'The actors are and play themselves.' (1979:114). Self-reference has a large metatheatrical impact because it distances us from the production by causing us to consider the production. Hornby describes it as; '... a splash of cold water thrown into the face of a dreaming... audience.' (1986:104) and Homan mentions that instances of self-reference are 'pure because they come from the medium itself...' (1981:15) I enjoy Hornby's 'splash of water' analogy. Self-reference within metatheatre is an unexpected means of distancing the audience whilst forcing them to consider the thematic content.

Hornby's detailed device-by-device analysis has been very useful in understanding metatheatre. The concept of *ostraneniye* borrowed from Shlovsky is particularly pertinent as is the discussion

of ontological insecurity but Hornby fails to address the broader topic of what makes any particular play metatheatrical. Hornby has made mention that metatheatrical devices usually call into question the notion of self but fails to conclude that metatheatre requires the examination of self. I have found the lack of a link between device and theme limits Hornby', otherwise invaluable definition of metatheatre. Lionel Abel, whose approach to metatheatre will be examined in the following chapter however, examines metatheatrical themes in depth.

CHAPTER FIVE

Into The Psyche With Abel

In theorising a space for metatheatre Hornby's mechanical approach is contrasted by the psychological approach of Lionel Abel. Abel coined the term metatheatre remarking; 'It is a strange and not undramatic fact... that something shinningly individual will continue to be seen darkly until it has a name.' (1963:151) Abel finds evidence of metatheatre dating back to Greek tragedy and argues for the reclassification of numerous tragedies as metatheatres.

Abel believes metatheatre is a by-product of tragedy and metatheatre occurs when a tragedy is not successfully written. Abel ascertains that tragedy can no longer be written due to the atheistic position of western society and Shakespeare receives the brunt of Abel's criticism. Abel denounces many of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies as defective, 'they are failures at tragedy, not efforts to write melodrama: *Lear*, *Othello*... *Timon of Athens* are inadequate tragedies...' (1963:117)

Abel's view has merit; he argues that tragedy deals with a conflict between the individual and god. In these plays the gods are evident but the struggle lies between the individual and themselves. Macbeth's downfall may have been preordained, however, his conflict is internal as he struggles to contain his insatiable ambition. Lear's downfall is not brought about through a conflict with the gods but through poor judgement. This struggle with self we have already recognised as the key thematic concern of metatheatre. Metatheatrical conflict concerns the individual not the world surrounding them.

I disagree with Abel's classification of works such as *King Lear* and *Othello* as metatheatre due to their thematic concerns. Themes, like devices, are not enough to create metatheatre. Themes must be coupled with the devices and vice versa. In *Hamlet* we see this occurring, in *King Lear* and *Othello* we do not.

Abel argues that the conflict between the individual and god is necessary for creating tragedy and can no longer be achieved, as society no longer lives in fear of god. As the individual moves away from religion so to do they move away from the potential to be tragic, at least in the dramatic sense of the word.

Abel uses two maxims in his identification of metatheatre. Maxim one states that metatheatre presents life that is already theatricalised. 'The plays I point to as metatheatre have one common character: all of them are theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalised.' (1963:p. vi) Maxim two states, 'all the world's a stage' and 'life is a dream.'

I find these maxims invaluable in ascertaining a play's metatheatrical status. The self conscious character is pivotal to recognising 'life seen as already theatricalised' Abel seeks characters that live theatricalised lives and the character must appear theatricalised before the introduction of the actor. Metatheatre must contain characters that are self conscious of their self-consciousness.

Successful naturalism occurs through the actor's ability to ignore extraneous elements surrounding production, such as crews and audience. Metatheatre differs from unsuccessful naturalism because naturalism focuses on the reality of the situation while metatheatre accepts that the real cannot be placed on stage and, undaunted, gets on with telling the story. We are aware of the non-reality but our experience is not diminished by this fact.

Characters of metatheatre focus on an exploration of the human condition: What am I? How am I? And ultimately why am I? Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' soliloquy comes to mind and Abel says of Hamlet that 'he is the first stage figure with an acute awareness of what it means to be staged.' (1963:132). Characters of metatheatre are aware of the awareness they have of their character state. Puchner observes of Don Quixote that he, '...can be said to 'stage' the world around him: he assigns 'roles' to everyone he meets and takes great care to live up to the 'script' he has chosen for himself. (2003:5) Blaise Pascal provides an analogy useful in differentiating the self-conscious and naïve character,

...were the universe to kill him [man], he would be more noble than his slayers... man knows he is crushed, but the universe does not know that it crushes him. (1963:60)

Man represents the metatheatrical whilst the naïve resembles the universe.

Naturalism is the voice of the realist and metatheatre the genre of the philosopher. Metatheatre produces philosophical characters such as Hamlet and Don Quixote. Ivan Turgenev and Herman Melville have found these characters compelling, stating 'A true intellectual has to be a Hamlet or a Don Quixote.' and 'These, are the only... real characters in literature'. (Turgenev and Melville respectively in Abel, 1963:139)

What better characters to expound upon the themes of self than philosophers? Metatheatrical works abound with characters capable of engaging Plato, Camus or Sartre in rigorous debate. Peer, through discussions with The Thin Man and The Button Moulder (the devil and death), philosophises individual purpose and divine will. The concept that, like a photograph, people can be cast in the positive or negative aspect and the confrontation and cheating of death are poignant examples. Tad Mosel's *Impromptu* (1961) forces philosophical comparisons between acting and life as four actors stage an improvised show and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, along with a plethora of my own characters act as philosophers.

Abel has found that weaker metatheatres usually do not match their philosophical characters with the play as a whole. Abel has called the suitability of Hamlet to Elsinore Castle into question and Muller's *Hamletmachine* is an example of this train of thought in a creative work. Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson commented that Hamlet play acts where other act. (Erikson in Hornby, 1986:68) This creates a schism within the play as Hamlet's reality overpowers the contrived nature of his circumstances. Abel states:

The feeling that characters can be superior to their situations may have suggested to Shakespeare... his treatment of Hamlet. Why not... justify the great character stuck with a bad plot? (1963:142)

This jocular view, however, does not explain the distance between Hamlet and his play. Were it Shakespeare's intention to showcase the character dislocated from plot then surely the contrivances would have been more mechanical. I believe that Shakespeare created his most believable character in Hamlet and that Hamlet exists at a level otherwise unreachable by Shakespeare.

In this sense *Hamlet* is a weak metatheatre. The metatheatrical thematic concern is explored through Hamlet but rarely evident in the other characters. Hamlet's philosophical self-doubt limits the tragic potential rather than creating metatheatre. The same can be said of Tartuffe in Moliere's *Tartuffe* (1664) and of Forsythe in Tom Holloway's *Pathetique And The Papers*. (2004)

Egan describes the way in which Hamlet and his situation are essentially greater than the play around him:

Hamlet's... overriding concern is a dialectic with the... terms of existence... the... exposure and death of Claudius can no more amend the world Hamlet apprehends than... cleanse foul vapours from the air... (*Drama Within Drama*, 1975:10)

Many playwrights attempt to create the world Hamlet strove to bring into existence. Hamlet's story is on the periphery in *Ros. & Guil.*, 'Scripted' creates a theatrical world in which Hamlet exists as a comical mockery and 'He' shows us a world where Hamlet's struggle is subordinate to Ophelia's plight, but *Hamletmachine*, comes closest to giving this metatheatrical legend due homage.

Muller has taken a great metatheatrical character and written the script he thought best suited to Hamlet's metatheatricality. After producing *Hamletmachine* in May 2006 I believe Muller is commenting on more than socialist practice. He is in fact commenting on literary history and the determinism/free-will debate. I sought to heighten and exemplify the Hamlet crisis in order to achieve Muller's view of transient character self. The initial casting requirements of one Hamlet and one Ophelia were insufficient. The di- and tri-chotomy of the human mind (excuse the metalinguistics) was expressed through three Hamlets and two Ophelias simultaneously cementing the idea that no single being can have a fixed entity or consciousness.

The way in which the characters embody their search for self is the crux of Abellian metatheatre. Similarities can be made between metatheatre and psychological identity crisis. Hornby comments: 'In a society where people's roles seem so fluid and unpredictable... we fear letting go of the feeble identities... we have.' (1986:86) This fear of the illusory identities we wear, is pivotal to characters of metatheatre. Hamlet's rolelessness climaxes when he cannot distinguish

his madness as feigned or real. The Priestess similarly manipulates The Monk in 'Moon Bride' and Alex has a break down in 'Scripted' as he realises he is acting but cannot not act.

Theatre is an ideal medium for the exploration of identity crisis; we watch actors, playing characters, undergoing a crisis, creating a triptych of identity confusion. Schleuter states: 'In emphasising the rift between the essential... and... role playing self... the playwright... suggests the loss of identity experienced by modern man.' (1979:14) and Hornby concurs concluding, 'In developing an identity, we are... forced by reality to limit our sense of self.' (1986:70) Freud's identity theory as cited in Hornby is also relevant:

Originally the ego includes everything, later it detaches from... the external world. The ego feeling we are aware of... is... only a shrunken vestige of a... more extensive feeling... which embraced the universe. (1986:70)

Identity is not inherent but rather learnt and this learning process does not end. It is this desire to finish learning that we yearn for. Hornby refers to the act of gaining identity as a painful process and also notes that all human roles are relative. We also have different roles for different situations and this further inhibits our ability to ascertain the core (if indeed there is a core) of our self. Bertholt Brecht's *The Good Woman Of Setzuan* (1996) showcases the identity crisis of Shen Te/Shui Ta. The audience does not know which of these personas is the mask and which the masked. '...this is not so much one identity covering another as two identities covering nothing.' (1986:81)

The unanswerable questions that characters of metatheatre pose in an attempt to resolve their identity crisis creates the paradox effect of metatheatre outlined in the introduction. We believe there should be an answer to the question, 'Why am I?' and can all identify with identity crisis. Metatheatre asks us to scrutinise and eventually agree with the characters that this question and identity crisis is unresolvable. Knowing that we cannot know the answer creates ontological insecurity. We begin to see parallels between the manipulation of characters and our own lives. Having these thoughts whilst constructing an exegesis on metatheatre has an even greater meta impact.

Viewing metatheatre as character driven has been useful. It is through the characters that the themes are expressed most clearly. Abel, however, seems uninterested in the modes in which

these themes are portrayed. Pwap is the only device that receives a mention and the view that a playwright's intention to write in a specific genre does not limit the ability to write metatheatre I find hard to believe. I disagree with the view that metatheatre is created when tragedy fails. A tragedy can fail to be tragic for reasons other than the inclusion of metatheatrical moments. This concept implies that works that exhibit metatheatrical moments are as much metatheatres as works that are solely focused on metatheatrical themes and explore these in metatheatrical ways. *Noises Off* examines the concept of actor and characters self and, in Abel's view, would be considered a metatheatre rather than a farce exhibiting metatheatrical moments. Abel's overly broad inclusion has ensured that definition of metatheatre continues to be necessary. Through narrowing Abel's parameters I have found that metatheatre is a deeply psychological genre where the struggles of character to ascertain self metaphorically represents the struggles of the individual with the ambiguity of self.

Abel's views are closely compared with Hornby's in the following chapter as I attempt to synthesise their arguments.

CHAPTER SIX

The Mechanist & The Mind

So how can Hornby and Abel's views ever be reconciled? Abel is overtly broad in acceptance and Hornby, structurally exclusive. Abel has even said 'I... have been criticised... [for] my ever loose and sometimes erratic definition...' (1963:v) Whilst Hornby's statement that, '...metadrama is rarely given an adequate definition...' (1986:31) remains true even after his elaborate attempt to clarify the definition. Is either view correct or incorrect? No, misguided sometimes, but in terms of right or wrong both are right however both require further parameters. Both Hornby and Abel have attempted to satisfy us with a clear definition and while their views at first appear mutually exclusive, I think they have approached their definitions from different angles.

Comparing Hornby and Abel reveals the middle ground. Where Abel is overly philosophical and psychological Hornby makes little contribution and where Abel leaves us craving structure Hornby fills in the gaps. Neither argument is conclusive by itself; however, by coupling the devices of Hornby with the psychology of Abel we arrive at a clearer definition. Abel's broad inclusions are narrowed by Hornby's parameters. Just as Hornby's non-metatheatres are culled by the necessity of Abellian characters and metatheatrical themes.

Hornby's metatheatre is structuralist. All parts equal a whole, just as an engine can be broken down to nuts and bolts, pistons and fuel so too can a metatheatre be broken down into pwap, rwar and references. Hornby does not recognise that metatheatrical themes are also necessary. Without the proviso that metatheatrical devices work towards a metatheatrical theme Hornby lets a plethora of non-metatheatrical works into the canon.

Abel's metatheatre is psychological; it involves recognition by self-conscious characters of their self-consciousness. Homan comments that Abellian metatheatre, '...suggest[s] that our dreams

are as real as our reality.' (1981:219) Abel is concerned with the way metatheatre explores self and states of self rather than the means by which this exploration occurs. With no structural concerns however, Abel also allows non-metatheatrical works into the canon.

It is through a combination of these views that we find true metatheatre. The works that portray Abellian characters and themes through the metatheatrical devices outlined by Hornby are the true metatheatres. These are the plays that go beyond 'standard' theatre. Both the thematic content and devices of delivery are represented through and within each other. These are the plays that provide audiences with a meta experience.

In terms of this project I suggest the following definition of metatheatre: Metatheatre is theatre which explores ontological insecurity through devices which create recognition of the process of recognition by means of distancing us from our own cultural webs. With this view in mind I will discuss my own works as they have lead to this redefinition of metatheatre.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Oswinism

I believe that, thematically, metatheatre is concerned with what I term the illusion/reality conundrum. In my view, all metatheatrical plays are responses to this conundrum. In life we are presented with stimuli, which, we perceive to be real, at the same time we are presented with large amounts of illusion. Our hopes, fears, dreams and unrealised creativity all can be considered illusion. The theatre exists in the boundary between illusion and reality. When we watch a play we are asked to consider what we experience as true. At the same time however, we realise that the experience is an elaborate illusion. It is real in that it is tangible, however, the experience is ultimately fictitious and therefore not real. By extension if the play is a real illusion, so too might our lives be a real illusion.

How can a world of illusion and a world of reality coexist? Schleuter quotes from Michel de Ghelderode's *The Death of Doctor Faust*:

...where is Faust?..
Is he a fiction?..
He is real and false at the same time. (1979:1)

Faust is indeed real, we know about him, we can read about and view him in numerous literary works yet at the same time he is a figment of the imagination existing, ultimately, only in the mind. The drama of many plays lies in attempting to understand the illusion/reality conundrum. Puchner tells us, in his introduction to Abel's *Tragedy and Metatheatre*, that:

The power of the theatre [in *The Tempest*] is beyond all bounds. With the help of his stage hand[s]... Prospero creates a realm of breathtaking learning and beauty... (2003:11-12)

We are presented with a world accepted as real, however, we note that it is populated by illusion. Each character lives in a complex relationship with the reality and illusion of the island.

Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (2001:141), states, 'the credibility of successful illusion is itself menacing' it's not only menacing but terrifying as well. If we cannot distinguish between illusion and reality how can we survive? The Father in *Six Characters*, Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and both Shakespeare and Mullers' Hamlets embody this struggle. Schleuter realises, 'The characters who populate these plays [are] metaphors for the dichotomy of... [the] real and the fictive...' (1979:11) and Egan notes that Shakespeare's use of metatheatrical devices are; 'attempts to control... reality directly through... dramatic illusion.' (*Drama Within Drama*, 1975:1)

The conundrum is created by our inability to definitively confirm any experience as either an occurrence of illusion or reality. John Mighton's *Possible Worlds* (1990) deals directly with this inability through the brain in a vat paradox where our knowledge of the world around us comes into question, also mentioned in Stephen Law's 2003 *The Philosophy Gym*. Most effective, however, is Camus' *The Outsider* (2000). We encounter a man whose reality precludes the ability to entertain illusion, even within his thoughts. The honesty of his innate humanity causes him to exist without the illusion of sympathy or empathy.

We have constructed the insolvable illusion/reality conundrum through our struggle to answer the universal 'why?' Shui Ta/Shen Te's inner rolelessness leads us to conclude that every aspect of life is illusion. Philosophy surrounding the reality of illusion stems back to Plato's supposition that life is merely shadows flickering on the wall of a cave and reality, if it exists, is beyond the ability of shadows to comprehend.

In contrast to this is the theory that everything is wholly real. Equally unprovable, this train of philosophy shows no distinction between tangible and imaginative reality. In the moment of inspiration or imagining do we give birth to new facets of reality? Theatre exists in a real world therefore it cannot be home to illusion. If this were true, how do we explain the existence of art and theatre, which exists primarily to distance us from the real? These questions are unanswerable yet they lie at the heart of metatheatre.

The conundrum is further convoluted when we watch a play as opposed to reading one since both illusion and reality are present. We witness the illusory character and the real actor simultaneously. An example of this is encountered when we see nudity on stage. Do we believe

we are viewing the character's or the actor's naked body? The mind becomes confused as to who we are seeing. The illusion seems very real. (Aleks Sierz, *In Yer-Face Theatre*, 2001)

Pirandello's obsession with defining, breaking and redefining the boundaries between illusion and reality created his acclaim. Williams comments on Pirandello's use of illusion:

...the nature of art has always been a... shared illusion, which is made real. ...what we have now reached... [is] wholly illusory action... The illusion is... an expression of illusion itself.
(2001:141)

Pirandello's use of illusion, 'dramatises the relativity of identity.' (Schleuter, 1979:11) *Six Characters* presents us with illusory characters that are more real than the supposedly real ones, and *Henry IV* poses the question of whether we would rather live in recognised or unrecognised illusion.

Karl Marx states in his *A Contribution To The Critique Of Hegel's Philosophy Of Right* (1844) that:

Man, who has found only the reflection of himself in the fantastic reality of heaven, where he sought a superman, will no longer feel disposed to find the mere appearance of himself, the non-man, where he seeks and must seek his true identity.

This statement indicates the inability of man to accept the meekness of the individual within him. This is a recurring metatheatrical theme, Peer Gynt turns away from the reflection of himself and seeks his true self, as does Muller's Hamlet, Faust attempts to dislocate the problem of self by selling his soul, and Strindberg's *A Dream Play* presents us with the many facets of self. Throughout *A Dream Play* we are confronted with the question of which self is true or real? Strindberg offers the possibility that none (and all) of them represent the truth of self.

The illusion/reality conundrum is evident within my own works. In 'He', He attempts to confront the actor controlling his character. The Priestess and the Boy are established as illusory yet both seem plausibly real in relation to the Monk in 'Moon Bride' And the characters of 'On The Death' suffer the belief that they are tools of illusion wielded by a being with no concept of the word.

Coupled with the illusion/reality conundrum I place a strong emphasis on creating anti-theatrical metatheatre. I use the term to explain metatheatre that views theatre in a negative light:

‘Modernist metatheatre... assigns a negative value to theatre.’ (Puchner, *Stage Fright*, p. 18) This antitheatricality is an instigator of plot in ‘Scripted’, ‘Moon Bride’ and ‘On The Death’. The fallibility of the author figure initiates the antitheatrical tendencies within ‘On The Death’. The characters rage at their inept author, and, in turn, the author allows the characters to express his ineptitude creating a paradoxical cycle.

‘On The Death’ explores the frailty of the academic author writing a thesis to support a play and vice versa. Originally I intended to present the unfinished ‘ismism’ as my major creative work, however, two years on a single play is a long time and I found my frustration growing, as I perceived myself unable to create sufficiently original new metatheatre. I struggled to find new avenues of exploration that differed significantly from my previous works. My dissatisfaction with the topic continued and I began writing notes about how my candidature made me feel. Upon reading the play you may suppose that these feelings consisted largely of depression and sadness concerning my inability to find the new spark I needed and these suppositions are correct. It is from these notes that ‘On The Death’ was born. An author who feels he has no creative potential creates five characters, this semi-fictional author does not know how to utilise his characters or what they are capable of. I had my new metatheatre! It would comment on the relationship between character and author and on the process of writing and inspiration. More broadly though, it is an exploration of determinism and self, presenting a world in which free will and determinism war with self. The majority of my original notes remain evident within the script. ‘On The Death’ is the most antitheatrical of all of my works and also the most autobiographical. The ultimate message is that there is no reason or purpose for creative endeavours and by extension we are lost in a life without plot. I find it amusing and somewhat nihilistic that in writing a play about my inability to be creative I feel I have reached a new level in my creativity.

By defining metatheatre as theatre which explores ontological insecurity through devices which cause recognition of the process of recognition by distancing us from our cultural webs, we can see that the antitheatricality of ‘On The Death’ forces consideration of ontological insecurity. To present ‘On The Death’ without a stressed, or overly coherent, plot furthers this definition in that the audience recognises what is missing structurally from the play and can relate the missing

structure to their own feelings of loss of identity, or the unknowability of identity. In turn this relates directly back to the character's innate search for self. The depth of antitheatricalism in 'On The Death' forces consideration of ontological insecurity, Puchner comments, 'The attempt to exorcise antitheatricalism obscures the fact that a suspicion of the theatre plays a constitutive role in... theatre and drama.' (2002:1)

It is in the view that theatre is worthy of suspicion that I have developed the conflict points within 'On The Death'. Metatheatrical conflict does not exist between people and god, but rather between the theatre and itself. This is represented in 'On The Death' in the author/character conflict and the implied author/inspiration conflict. 'There is a passivity to creative writing... the author... feels more that he is being acted upon than that he is doing something.' (Hornby, 1986:18)

'On The Death' seeks to recreate the passive role of the author. The drama requires the author's ineptitude, however, it is through this ineptitude that the author unwittingly reaches his potential.

Rather than seeking to displace god I allow the theatre to be godlike. The characters' struggle with ontological insecurity allows them to become playwright characters. 'On The Death Of Character - A Metatheatrical Tragedy' refers to the death of the naïve character. Where the naïve character is dead, however, the playwright character has emerged. It is these characters that view their life as 'already theatricalised.' They stage the world around them and their recognition and manipulation of their self-consciousness lies at the core of my dramatic work. In metatheatre, '...almost every important character acts at some moment like a playwright...' (Abel, 2003:119) In Oswinian drama it is not a matter of 'at some moment' my characters strive to manipulate themselves and others into roles constantly. They strive to create and direct. In 'He' Vyne will always play He's victim. She creates this role for herself and it is reaffirmed by the role of mother and nurturer adopted by Xistene.

Throughout 'On The Death' the characters showcase their playwright status and we learn what sort of plays they strive to write. Boy demands to have a scene directed around his own death and strives to write tragedy. Man's desire to resolve their situation by staging a paradoxical analogy presents him as the philosophical playwright. Inamorata views herself as a demi-author. She is the manipulator and the cruel facilitator of their mindless action. It is appropriate that she is

represented as the puppeteer with nonchalant control over the others. Girl's narratorial style tells us she would write the novel or the pantomime and Woman is obsessed with fantasy and illusion creating of herself an erotic fantasy heroine.

In witnessing the characters attempting to stage the world around them we are reminded that their staging is also staged and by association so too could be the world in which we live. The feeling of being a pawn experienced by the characters is not intended to be limited to the play but should also be felt by the audience. Homan notes that metatheatrical characters strive to become the, 'controlling figure' (1981:23) just as we strive to control the external world.

Other devices I have taken advantage of in 'On The Death' include; false audience, what I term the reverse babushka effect and stream of consciousness dialogue. I will briefly discuss each of these.

Pirandello often made use of a false audience. *Six Characters* poignantly shows us the false audience of actor characters watching character characters and Henry IV creates a false audience of his surrounding characters. This technique creates effective *ostraneniye* as we evaluate a second audience and through them the play. Inamorata is a false audience for the majority of 'On The Death', implying, as we watch her, that we view the characters through the author's eyes. The paradox of the past participle allows multiple false audiences as the characters assume and drop their roles becoming audience for each other. The fourth wall is continually being deconstructed and reconstructed, creating effective metadramatic layering.

This deconstruction and reconstruction of the fourth wall is linked to my use of, what I term, the reverse babushka effect. This effect describes the process whereby the audience is confronted with an ever-expanding play. For example, the introduction of Inamorata creates a reverse babushka effect as the plight of the characters is heightened by the recognition that she has manipulative power over them. The discussion about the author and his abysmal creative efforts creates a second broadening as we recognise a power beyond Inamorata. By extension this allows a third occurrence as the audience realises that the fictional author character has in turn been created by a real author and by further extension it is implied that this real author is in turn subject to a greater author figure. Puchner finds a similar process in Pirandello's works,

‘Pirandello delights in our bewilderment as we watch one layer of theatricality and illusion give way to the next...’ (2003:1)

Stream of consciousness dialogue is not a device specific to metatheatre. I have used stream of consciousness speech throughout ‘On The Death’ in order to distance the audience from mainstream dialogue. This non-linear and non-naturalistic way of speaking implies we are hearing the characters thoughts and therefore they appear more honest than if their thoughts were processed before spoken. This also dehumanises my characters implying that rather than being real they are products of imagination. When we view a realistic painting of a house we find ourselves analysing the house rather than the artwork. In viewing an abstract impression of a house we are reminded of the creative process behind the art. Similarly by abstracting the speech of my characters I invite the audience to recognise the artistic process.

Metatheatrical success does not reside solely within the script; direction and production can alter, heighten, lessen or destroy the original intentions of a play. Hornby recognises the importance of good metatheatrical direction stating, it allows the actors to remove, ‘the fiction of performance’ (1986:98) In contrasting the live presence of actors with the fixed nature of script, and in creating recognition of this contrast, metatheatrical drama is born. It is the task of the director to create these juxtapositions, encouraging the audience to recognise the contrast.

With a look, a sigh or a single word my characters find the means to convey their view of their portrayals. After the sexual interplay between Woman and Man in the opening scene of ‘On The Death’ I have stressed the importance of Woman making the difficulties of extracting herself from the set obvious to the audience. This gives the impression that Woman is aware of the technical difficulties involved in the scene. Similarly, Inamorata’s actions regarding her mid-show hunger pangs have found a greater metatheatrical impact in direction than was originally intended whilst writing the script.

During production of *Hamletmachine* I found myself adding dialogue to accentuate the meta impact of any given scene. Hamlet 3’s command that, ‘...behind me the set is put up.’ was repeated three times for meta impact before the Ophelia-stage-hands brought the set on. This moment commented on the potential for backstage error and also the fact that in low-budget

productions actors are forced to perform set changes, even if this means moving a fridge in wet wedding dresses.

The next short chapter will briefly outline some of the difficulties I have encountered in combining creative and, more traditionally, academic research and how the exegesis has influenced the script and vice versa.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Metaexegesis

Howard Barker makes the comment,

Theatre has no business with research... research is something carried out by specialists called academics or non-specialists called journalists. (1989:73)

Often I have had similar thoughts throughout my candidature. The ability to work as inspiration catches me became limited by the need to theorise my character's inner thoughts and intentions. I viewed my work as something clinical needing dissection. I grew detached from the artistic process in development of the theoretical. This detachment, of course, assisted the writing of the exegesis, allowing analysis of my own decisions in a metatheatrical light, however, I began to echo Schleuter's thoughts when she questioned the creativity of the metatheatrical playwright, 'Are these artists charlatans, successful only in an ostentatious display of craft which disguises their inability as artists.' (1979:1) In hindsight, however, I do not consider myself to be a charlatan covering up my own inability and that meta analysis of metatheatre is indeed a very meta activity.

Considering Freud's primary and secondary thought process I believe the playwright works on the primary level whilst the academic works on the secondary. Surely in attempting to combine the two we minimise both the creative and theoretical potential. Conversely, the ability of the playwright to be both academic and creative allows the characters to be developed in an intelligent and insightful as well as creative manner. I believe this is especially true of the metatheatrical playwright. Who better is qualified to explain to us the rationale surrounding a play than the playwright? By articulation of the drive to create through the primary process we operate within the secondary process. I argue that being gifted in one process does not exclude

the ability to be gifted in the other, but simply point out the difficulty of working in such a duality.

Paul Carter offers a different point of view in *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research*,

Creative research [is] a phrase that ought to be an acknowledged tautology. If research implies finding something that was not there before, it ought to be obvious that it involves imagination. (2002:7)

That said, the process of combining theoretical thinking with creative thinking, has been a definite stumbling block for me as a playwright. But also one I think I have overcome. The exegesis has spawned and continues to spawn multitudinous lines of further questioning which I have been avidly following. The same process has applied itself to my scripts and I have found my plays expanding to multiple acts before being reigned in to the shorter plays I am presenting as part of my Master of Fine Arts examination and after coupling the script development with the exegesis development I believe that both my scripts and my exegesis have evolved into well rounded products of research. The scripts have assisted in the exegesis edit and the exegesis has similarly helped in the edit of the scripts, particularly 'On The Death'.

Conclusion

Through completion of this project I now have a clearer view of the nature of meta. The ability for any given thing to work at one level beyond itself easily applies to metatheatre and has aided me in creating what I view is a successful definition of the term and genre, metatheatre.

Metatheatre (at its most succinct) is the genre of theatre that deals with the paradox of self through recognition of the process of recognition. Through analysis of the cultural web we can understand why metatheatre has and will continue to be a successful metaphor for life. Slater tells us that, 'If the dominant theatrical tradition begins to seem hackneyed or oppressive, metatheatre offers an avenue for renewal.' (2002:7) Like a splash of cold water in the face, the uniquely meta experience of viewing metatheatre keeps audiences actively involved in the delivery and, in my experience, promotes lively analysis and discussion afterwards.

I acknowledge both Richard Hornby and Lionel Abel for the invaluable contribution their works have made to this project. Similar acknowledgements are also given to playwrights including Pirandello, Stoppard and Muller. Through their definitions and examples of metatheatre I have been able to piece together this comprehensive analysis of my own works and in particular, provide a definition that works to enlighten the viewing of 'On The Death'.

Through completion of 'On The Death Of Character - A Metatheatrical Tragedy' I believe I have provided a clearer definition of metatheatre than those currently available and extended my awareness of metatheatre in the academic and theoretical senses. My range of metatheatrical creativity has similarly been extended; this is particularly true of my developments in non-linear plotting, staging and direction as well as the development of my own uniquely autobiographical style. On viewing 'On The Death' I ask audiences to view the paradoxical action and entrapment of both character and writer as metaphors for the inexplicable nature of life.

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